

Congressional Testimony of AFSCME Local 658, Council 26

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Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure

Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings and Emergency Management

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Madam Chairwoman, Mr. Ranking Member and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for providing us with this opportunity to testify and present you with our concerns. AFSCME local 658 represents around 138 individuals who work as tour guides and visitor assistants. We are a new organization, having voted for union representation on September 15 and 16, 2010. My co-workers are dedicated to providing the best possible service to Congress and the American people and we wish to use this occasion to present you with their concerns. The following statement is intended to provide information on the health, safety and related issues in the Capitol and the Visitor Center.

The workforce of the Capitol Visitor Center (CVC) consists of some 224 government employees, plus a number of contractors operating the kitchen and cleaning services, as well as a small team of volunteers. The center is also home to personnel from the Attending Physician and both Sergeants at Arms, and is a locus of operations for the US Capitol Police. In all, it would be fair to say that as many as 3 or 4 hundred people are concerned, in one way or another, with meeting the needs of visitors at the center and across the Capitol grounds on any given day.

That represents a substantial investment on Congress' part, but one that should be considered in light of the 2 to 3 million official business and tourist visits to the center each year. To that must be added the very large number of other visitors, perhaps another half million, who are interested in the Capitol's exterior scenery only.

Of the 3 or 4 hundred persons involved in some degree with this enormous flux of people in and around the Capitol, those who work most closely with the visitors are the 138 guides and visitor assistants (or "VAs"). On average, each guide will essentially "teach" five "classes" every day while simultaneously acting as a park ranger leading a quarter-mile hike, capturing and holding the interest of 50 visitors at a time, ranging from preschoolers, to WWII vets, to special guests of Members. Each VA will play a part in the initial reception of visitors, determining their purpose for visiting the Capitol, providing whatever information or assistance they might need, and in moving up to 11,500 tour participants in and out of the historic part of the Capitol, while at the same time personally fielding perhaps 200 requests and inquiries a day on subjects as mundane as bathrooms and as esoteric as "Why do Americans want freedom so much?"

During Cherry Blossom season these numbers can be considerably higher. Over 17,000 visitors can pass through the center each day during the spring months, and each year it seems there are a larger number of visitors with little or no English. Throughout all this, both guides and VAs must continuously maneuver themselves and their guests with the Capitol's security and the continuity of Congress' operations in mind. At the same time they must remain ready to respond to safety hazards, disruptive behavior, facilities failures, or health emergencies. They

must be equally adept at dealing with large groups with special needs, with fire alarms, and with building evacuations.

Certainly the complexity of our job increases as visitor volume increases, but we are happy for the challenge, and pleased to see that visitor interest is so high. On the other hand, the guides and the VAs share a firm conviction that visitation numbers only tell part of the story. The other part, which we think is even more important, has to do with the impression that each visitor gains from the experience. In our view, Congress has chosen to follow the path initially set by President Washington and his contemporaries when they insisted on personally ensuring that the design of the Capitol building was not only functional, but also delivered exactly the right message to all those who saw it.

They understood that citizens and international travelers alike would carry away from the Capitol an indelible impression of Congress, of the federal government as a whole, of democracy, and of the American people themselves. To that end, Congress over the years has continued to dedicate considerable resources to making that impression an accurate one. We believe the Visitor Center and the people who work there are part of those resources, and our job, in actuality, is all about the impression that the Members wish their visitors to take home with them. A high number arriving is good. A high number departing with the right impression is priceless.

We are keenly aware that our role is a critical one. The daily service to the nation by Members and their staff, by Congress' professional offices, by the Architect's technicians and artisans, is often only relayed to a visitor through the people who greet them, who offer them explanation and help, who are - in a word - their hosts. I am proud to be able to say that my colleagues' performance is, and always has been, distinguished more by their painstaking faithfulness to the message Members want their guests to receive, than it is by mere numbers.

Of course, delivering a particular impression is not a simple task. The difficulty of the task increases with the volume of visitors, to be sure, but its true complexity varies with the visitors' culture, language, age, education, health, and emotional state, as it does with the weather and even the political climate of the moment. Other aspects of the challenge are remaining always sensitive, impartial, even-handed, non-partisan, apolitical, yet responsive, informative, and factually accurate. Taken as a whole, the representational aspects of the guide/VA specialty constitute a discipline and an art form – a defining one, which my colleagues take very seriously.

Over the first year and a half of operations in the new Visitor Center, a long pattern of incidents, new work conditions and new policies emerged which suggested to us that our managers did not understand this defining aspect of our job. Washington's original vision, of the message delivered by the visitors' experience, seemed to be taking a back seat to throughput numbers. In particular, our impression was that inadequate attention was given to visitors' experience on their way to and from the center, or to visitor safety. Our attempts to explain the importance of fully assuming our responsibilities as hosts, in order to deliver the impression that Members wish visitors to take home with them, were met with disinterest.

In many different approaches, we spent months trying to convince management that simply providing a movie, a tour, and a brochure does not guarantee success, no matter how many thousands of times you do it. Their continued rejection of this message helped us decide to form a union. We hope that the union will lead to a better appreciation in all quarters of how a host's attention to a guest's needs, interests, and well-being is fundamental to our task of ensuring the visitors leave the Capitol with a favorable impression of Congress and the United States. Hopes for the future aside, we are left at this stage of the process with some concerns, which we hope can be addressed in due course.

Before enumerating these concerns for the Committee, I wish to make clear that the Capitol Visitor Center is, in our judgment, a perfectly safe and very informative, enjoyable venue. We are very pleased that it is available to visitors and we believe it greatly improves visitors' experience, comfort, and safety. The following paragraphs describe areas where we think further improvement might be achieved, and where the improvements would benefit safety and security. The first of these centers on our preparedness for emergencies.

As hosts on the Members' behalf, we have a serious responsibility for our guests' safety. We are not satisfied with progress to date on CVC procedures for events such as: restrictions on movement in emergencies, evacuations from all parts of the Capitol, dangerous weather, loss of power, fire or explosion, a violent incident, or the discovery of potentially dangerous materials, objects or conditions. We believe a series of live exercises may be needed to identify the challenges that would present themselves in a real event, and the procedures that are developed from those exercises should be rehearsed periodically. We recognize that these measure lie far outside the purview of even the entire CVC organization, but feel nonetheless a responsibility to state the need.

In addition to practical preparation for emergencies, we are specifically concerned about coordination, communication and follow-through during emergencies. We believe that our CVC team response to minor emergencies has been confused and haphazard in many cases, indicating a need for standardization. Specifically, there have been instances of no response to a radio report of an emergency, cases in which several managers became involved in an emergency response but no one of them assumed overall responsibility for the successful conclusion of the event, cases in which phone calls to police or medical help were delayed because multiple managers each thought the other was doing it, and cases in which police or medical help took several minutes to arrive at the scene of an incident because managers failed to ensure they were given sufficient location information. We strongly recommend the designation of a specific person-in-charge of emergency response for each shift. We also recommend the development of quick-reference lists of necessary actions the person-in-charge must take for each type of incident, ("checklists"), to guide complete follow-through.

Because CVC communications take place on four different radio frequencies, it is also common for the users of only one frequency to be informed of the initiation or the termination of an emergency situation, despite the potential impact on the overall operation. The management response - adding a fifth communication channel (digital pagers) - will not necessarily fix this

problem, since it stems from inadequate organization and incomplete follow-through rather than a shortage of bandwidth. Again, checklists might prove helpful.

Of the classes of emergencies under discussion here, one of the most common is a visitor health problem. That is why we are particularly concerned with the absence of any on-site emergency medical service on Saturdays and holidays. The Office of the Attending Physician, which provides the CVC nurse-practitioner, is not open on weekends and holidays when the Members are not there. This is despite the fact that the same number of visitors pass through the Capitol each Saturday as on the preceding Friday, and visitor volume often spikes on holidays. There is, of course, a longer response time from the District of Columbia EMS.

Before moving to other considerations, it bears mentioning that emergency situations usually rest most heavily on the shoulders of the US Capitol Police, and our experience has been, almost without exception, that their response is impressive and highly professional. It is an honor to work with USCP. We do feel, however, that our emergency responses and theirs might mutually benefit from minor improvements in information sharing during emergency events.

We recognize that entry control point and entry procedures are strictly within the remit of the police, and we do not think it should be otherwise. Nonetheless, we feel obliged to point out to the Committee that every morning during peak season, from April to June, there are two waiting lines in front of the CVC containing, at times, nearly 800 people. These lines are filled by new arrivals at almost the same rate as people enter the building, so the waiting lines persist for most of the day. From the point of view of a terrorist wishing to inflict numerous casualties at an iconic American site, these lines are attractive targets. Our people who work near these lines are also vulnerable. We are not qualified to offer any further observations on this situation, but we believe it merits further evaluation from an appropriately high level.

On a related note, we are not entirely satisfied with our protection of the continuity of Congress' operations, in that we see evidence that people can, and frequently do, move through the Capitol without authorization badges and without escort. While CVC operations certainly contribute to this problem, we do not believe the CVC team is in a position to investigate or correct this situation unilaterally. USCP controls traffic throughout the Capitol, and there are many reasons for visitors to be in the Capitol, nearly all of which are unrelated to our tours. Again, a higher-level evaluation might be helpful.

Naturally, in any setting where thousands of people move through enclosed spaces each day, there is some potential for spread of disease. Up until recently, conventional wisdom held that simple hand-washing and sneeze-covering was sufficient protection in most situations. News about bedbugs, drug resistant microbes, and H1N1 flu has raised some questions about two features of CVC design: movie theater seats and audio-guide headsets. Bedbug infestations have been reported in New York theater seats where there are perhaps five shows a day. In contrast, a CVC theater seat may have 20 different occupants in a single day, from a decidedly international demographic. The CVC headsets each may be shared by up to five persons in a single day, and have been observed being chewed on by infants. Cleaning the equipment between uses does not seem to be practical and may, in fact, be impossible to do at all. We

recognize that the same concerns exist in many public buildings across the country, and other high volume locations like shopping malls. We do not feel the CVC presents a special case in this regard, but we mention it in view of the Committee's interest in public buildings and emergency management.

Finally, there remain a number of issues concerning visitors to the Capitol grounds, and our outdoor operations. Beyond greeting visitors outside the security check area at the center's front doors, VAs at posts further afield begin the welcoming, assessing and assisting process starting at the very boundaries of the grounds. We assist official business traffic as well as tourists, including groups bound for Members' offices, the Library or the Supreme Court. In addition, the CVC team has been considering and experimenting with leading tours through the grounds themselves. As a result, we consider all visitors to the grounds, even those not bound for the CVC, to be our responsibility to some degree. It appears to us that the US Capitol Police and the Office of the Attending Physician share this view.

From that perspective, we are concerned with severe weather - particularly with summer thunderstorms. These can arrive suddenly, and present several deadly threats to anyone who is exposed on the Capitol grounds. Lightning strikes are certainly a possibility, especially since the grounds are as much as 70 feet higher than the surrounding terrain. But injury from flying or falling debris is far more likely. Several storms over the past two years have been accompanied by wind gusts over 30mph - strong enough to shatter a tree limb or toss a steel crowd barrier like a kite. Thunderstorms also pose some risk to tours to the top of the dome. Wind gusts there can be two or three times the strength of gusts at ground level, and the anxiety level can be excessive among visitors on the catwalks when caught by unexpected lightning or hail storms. Naturally there is also the attendant danger of slipping and falling, including the recently-discovered possibility of falling 20 feet down manholes obscured in the middle of the lawn, after flood waters have blown their covers off.

There are no provisions for warning visitors of a storm's approach or for directing them to shelter. This applies equally to the 800 people waiting in line to enter the CVC. Everyone outside is left to fend for themselves, be they able bodied, children or infirm. In fact, the CVC team has no system to detect an approaching storm, and managers are often unaware when one is occurring.

The question of where 800 people might take shelter is a daunting one. The covered areas in front of the center might accommodate 300, but beyond that the solution is challenging. This dilemma has also presented itself in a different form when it has been necessary to evacuate thousands of visitors into sub-freezing temperatures, without their coats.

As the Committee is already aware, the lack of provisions for extreme heat and humidity, or for cold, wind and rain, is not a concern for visitors alone. The VAs have also had to fend for themselves. There is little shade or cover where they are posted, and there are no water fountains at all on the eastern half of the grounds. The Police at the same locations have access to chilled water bottles.

The long-delayed winter clothing issue included thin, non-water repellent coats, but no hats, gloves or boots. The VAs had to improvise using their own gear to approximate a uniform. There was no summer clothing issue so the VAs reclaimed Guide Service polo shirts and baseball caps from the obsolete clothing piles, and made do with their wool blend indoor uniform slacks. An equivalent situation confronted guides, under a policy that requires full coat-and-tie in the roasting temperatures found on summer dome tours. The result was less than attractive or professional, not very effective, and likely did not foster the favorable impression we sought to leave with visitors.

On the subject of visitor impressions outside the Capitol, the single detractor most often cited to us by visitors is the absence of a consistent, helpful system of signs leading to the center and to their Members' offices. This has become a more urgent issue with the redesign of security perimeters, since that has required the majority of visitors to walk almost a quarter of a mile before even reaching the visitor center's front doors, and to climb a graceful but nonetheless substantial 70-foot vertical rise. A wrong turn at any of the six major pathway intersections can easily double or triple their trek, not to mention the effect on their anxiety level as their tour reservation time approaches. Add to this the challenges of age or infirmity, and of extreme temperatures, then this can become a safety issue and the true value of a well-placed sign becomes evident. Likewise the true impact of the sign's absence on the visitors' impression of Congress also becomes clearer. Requiring a guest to hunt for or ask for something that would normally be readily available often results in resentment. Early attempts to address this with our managers brought no result.

Signage on the Capitol grounds is, of course, an issue that easily engages Members' attention. As hosts, we are well aware that face-to-face attention to a guest's needs usually creates the best impression. Unfortunately, VAs on the grounds are normally occupied with arranging transportation for visitors with mobility issues, and many visitors - particularly those from other countries - can be reluctant to approach police for directions. Once again, we realize that this is an issue that far exceeds the purview of the CVC team, however since it can place the health of infirm visitors at risk, we do feel it is within the scope of the Committee's request.

We are very pleased to observe that, following Mr. Ayers' recent appointment and significant changes in the CVC organization, our managers have had some success in addressing certain longstanding problems. Upcoming changes began to be announced in late August, and new, superior uniform items began to arrive last week. On Friday, September 24, managers announced over the radio which one of them is to be considered "in charge" of operations for a period of time. Some progress has occurred in the area of personnel and pay issues. CVC management appears to be more engaged in addressing our concerns. We are very encouraged by these signs, and are confident that our new union will prove to be a valuable partner in their ongoing efforts. We believe that we form a team with our managers, and this CVC team will only achieve mission success through cooperation.

We define mission success as meeting the expectations of Members of Congress. We believe the Members have invested heavily to ensure Washington's message continues to reach all those who come to see the Capitol, and they expect us to reinforce a favorable impression in all

respects. It is in the interest of meeting that expectation fully that we offer the foregoing list of concerns and insights. We hope, with this Committee's support, the CVC team - management and workers together - will be able in the near future to address this full list, and successfully carry out our mission.